ピアノの森

23

一色まこと

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The Perfect World of KA

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ISSHIKI Makoto

The Perfect World of KAI

23

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23

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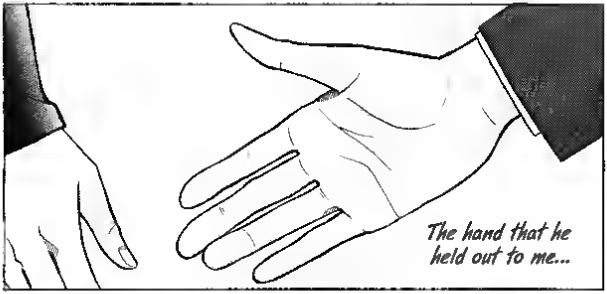
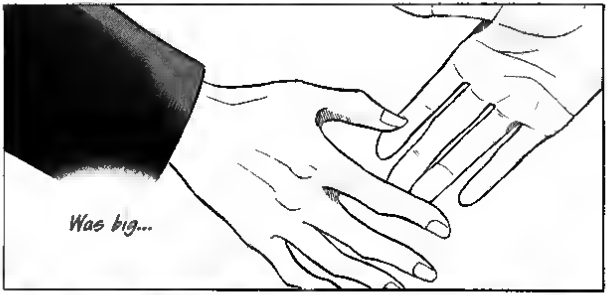

The hand that he
held out to me...


Was big...

And warm...

Sensei...

It enfolds my entire being...

I no longer have anything to fear!!

Thanks to his words... The words of my one and only teacher...

Chapter 206 Thank You

I no longer have anything to fear!!

I no longer...

Turn

I no longer...

The world around me hasn't changed, but...

My body is overflowing with energy!

My legs feel so light.

Ah...

Everything I see...

Seems to be shining!!

FIRST PERFORMER
NO. 44 SATORU MUKAI
(JAPAN)

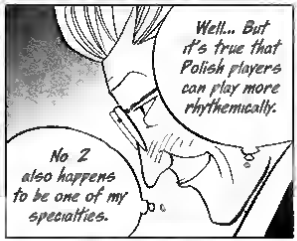
CONCERTO NO. 2
IN F MINOR OP. 21
SECOND MOVEMENT
LARGHETTO

Incredible!

Turn
Oh... It was me, wasn't it...

Could he possibly surpass Yushchenko's No. 2...?!
Who was it? Who said Mukai was just an extra?

Mukai Satoru...
This guy was an underclassman at my university, I think...
Flip Flip


Well... But it's true that Polish players can play more rhythmically.
No 2 also happens to be one of my specialties.

"So I want to walk the same path..." What??
"My beloved father is a piano tuner..."

What?
Satoru MUKAI
Japonia / Japan
He wants to become a piano tuner?!

Are you serious?

Even though he can play this well?!

THIRD MOVEMENT
ALLEGRO VIVACE

YAMAHA

Haha...

This guy is interesting!

Satoruuu
Oh, honey...
Satoru!! That was the greatest piano ever!!

Well, I must say he surpassed the expectations I had for him...
I wish Sousuke had been here to hear it.

His playing skills are this incredible... So why does he have so little self-confidence?!
Mukai-san was great!! It was really amazing!!

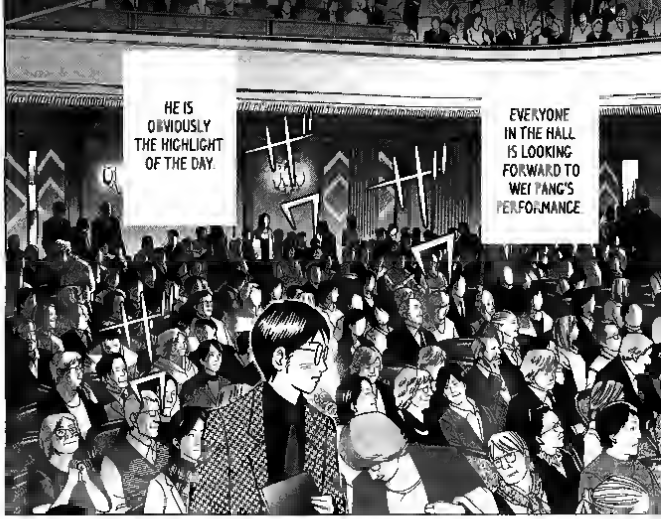
Hmm?
Rustle

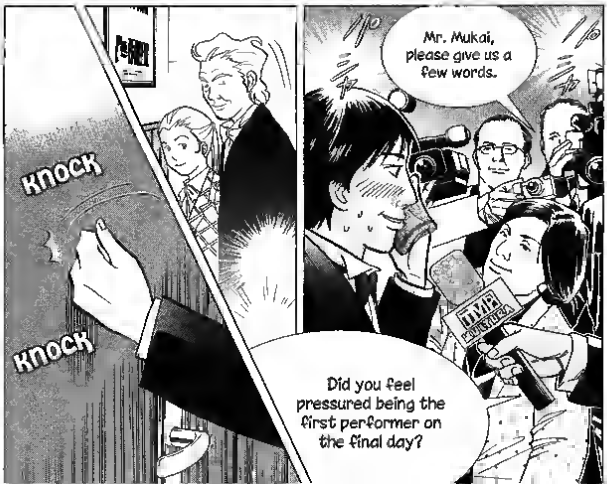
Whaat ?!! The ticket is in here?!

Which reminds me, I wonder if Sousuke has found his ticket?

Oh no! I've done something terrible to Sousuke!!

Next is Pang!
Ohhh, what am I gonna do? My heart's hammering...
Finally, next is Wei Pang!
Pang's coming up!!
Yes!! This is what I've been waiting for!!


HE IS OBVIOUSLY THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE DAY.
EVERYONE IN THE HALL IS LOOKING FORWARD TO WEI PANG'S PERFORMANCE.


KNOCK
KNOCK
Mr. Mukai, please give us a few words.
Did you feel pressured being the first performer on the final day?

Yes, Maestro.
I look forward to playing with you!

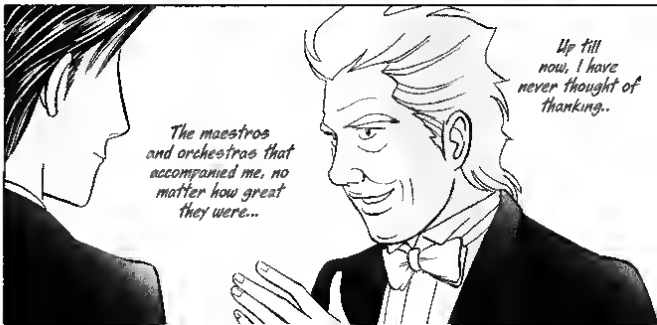
Hello! Are you ready?

Any requests for me?
No, nothing in particular.

I'm happy just being able to perform with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra!
This is the best orchestra to play Chopin with, and the best conductor, and...

Oh? Was he always this nice?
Ahaha, thank you!!
Ah...
I'll give it my best.

What's happened to me..?!
Right now, my heart is awashed in irrepressible gratitude!!


Up till now, I have never thought of thanking..
The maestros and orchestras that accompanied me, no matter how great they were...

Tsk.

So Pang ended up as the second performer after all ..

I had wanted him to go last..

Humph

Hao's plan seems to have worked out quite well, no?

But judging from the mood in the hall .

Everyone here is waiting for Wei Pang's performance.

Sigh...

If his being on his deathbed was all just part of the plot, I wonder if he'll really die.

I think Pang could have won by his own power alone.

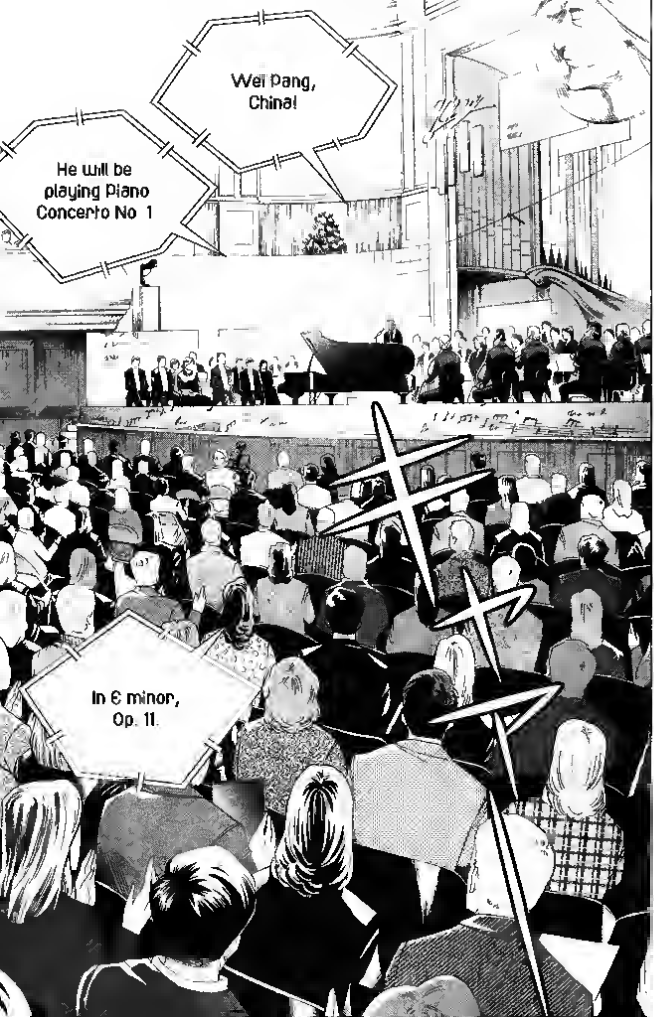
Hao should've just doled out the cash quietly... That greedy old bastard with his petty tricks!

.....

Was it?
Then pray that I don't have to repeat myself again.

Mr. Kong, that's the fifth time you've said that.

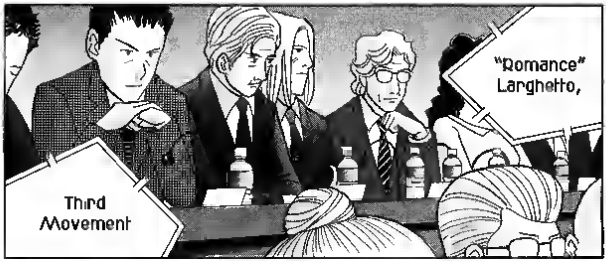
The second performer on the final day is...
Number 48...

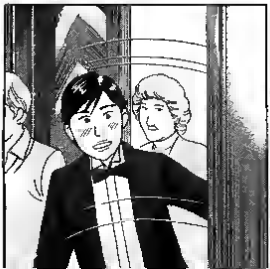

Wei Pang, China!
He will be playing Piano Concerto No. 1
In E minor, Op. 11.

Second Movement

Allegro Maestoso,

First Movement


"Romance" Larghetto,
Third Movement



Rondo Vivace

This is the first time I've felt this way!
Right now, I...
I feel thankful for everything!
His piano of choice is
Steinway.

Number 48,
Wei Pang,

China.

I'm even thankful...

For that gossip article.

Thank you for noticing...

A piece of trash like me!!

Thank you for giving me the chance to play the piano!

Thank you for letting me meet...

I may have no love for you, but...

I thank you, from the bottom of my heart!

Hao!!

What time is it?

Isn't it almost time for Wei's performance?

Kukuku... No need to worry.

Wei is gonna win! I'm certain of it!

.....

Well, since you all took the trouble to come,

Why not have a preemptive celebratory drink in my ward?

So, my son...

Live up to your name...

And put on the greatest performance ever!!

Thank You! END

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Artwork from "Piano no Mori"

The orchestra plays on its own for around four minutes.

Before the piano joins in...

I've listened to it so many times...

Yet this is the first time I've actually noticed...

Chapter 207
Discovery
What a beautiful melody this is!!

Ahaha... Well I suppose the hour is late...

It's probably too late for even a little pre-emptive celebratory drink!

By the time I wake up, Wei's victory will have already been decided. .

Though the police just have to come first thing in the morning to discuss the accident with me.

Really, it's quite irritating.

Though. . I simply have to grease their palms with a little money to shut them up...

Flip

Oh!

It seems the orchestra has just started playing.

You... are nothing more than an obstacle to Wei now.
Huh?
What?
Mr. Hao...
You... are the owner of the factory, so why don't you take responsibility for the incident?
What... What are you...
Don't worry!
What did you just say?!
Your faithful son Wei Pang will...
Definitely win this competition as a parting gift for you.
What?!

Hao!

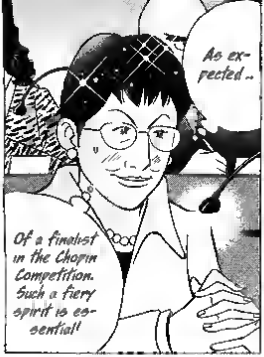
Breathe

Hao!

I thank you...

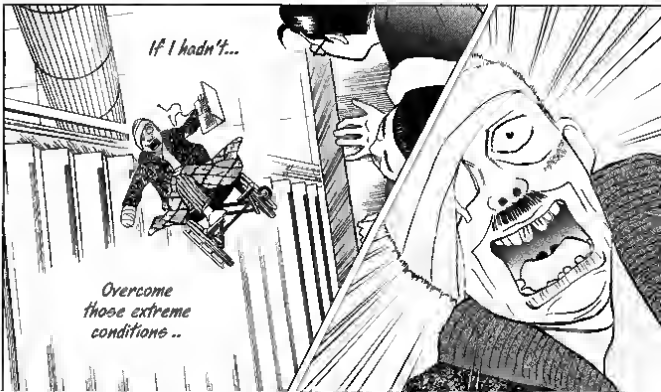
From the bottom of my heart!!

FIRST MOVEMENT
ALLEGRO MAESTOSO


As expected..
Of a finalist in the Chopin Competition. Such a fiery spirit is essential!

Whoa. Such vigor right from the introduction.
Is he able to play such music because he has shouldered the memories of his past?

Hao!

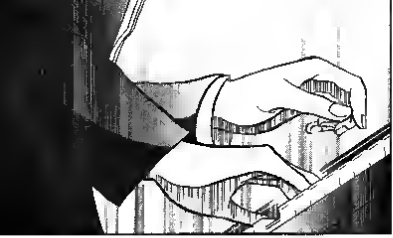

If I hadn't...
Overcome those extreme conditions..

I do not believe I would have...
If I hadn't been in the midst of that insanity...
Been able to find Ajino-sensei.
If my line had not been on the line...
My soul would not have been connected to the piano!

Hao!
If you wish to obtain prestige through my piano playing...

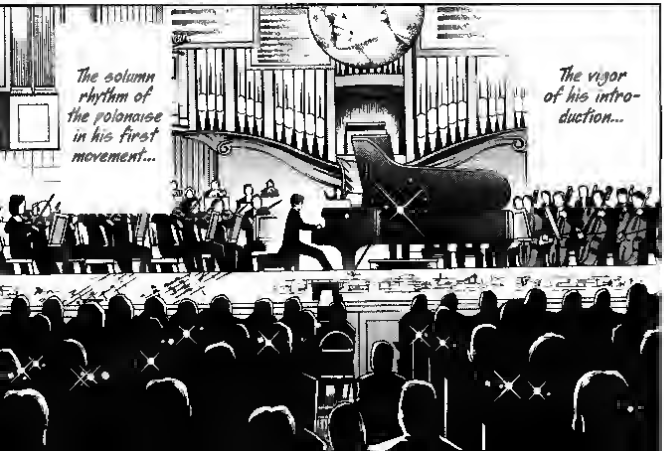
Then I shall gladly...
I shall gladly play the piano!

Hao!
Can you hear my piano?!



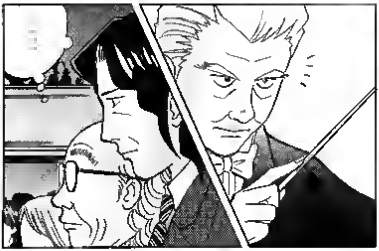
Can you hear it, Hao?!

In a single instant...
He's called up the memories of that awe-inspiring performance in Paris...


The solumn rhythm of the polonaise in his first movement...
The vigor of his introduction...

The kind of music that is probably not what Chopin would have wished for...

The chilling music that only Fang can produce, that can send shivers through you with a single note...

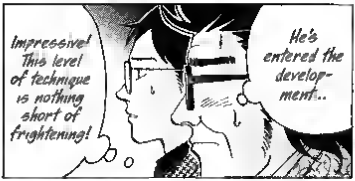


And starting from the second theme..
Huh?

It changed!
STEINWAY &

What's with this gentle melody?
Huh? I thought his second theme would ring with more vimess, but..

?


Impressive! This level of technique is nothing short of frightening!
He's entered the development..

Has this kind of music actually been present within Pang all along..?
Rather than calling it a change...

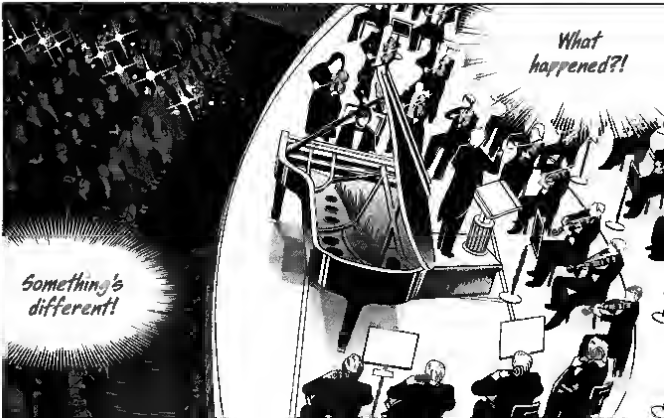
Whether his playing has really changed..
Let's see for sure, when the second theme comes up again after the development...

RECAPITULATION
SECOND THEME
Wha...

To think Fang could play such warm music...
He was his usual self during the intro, so what's with the sudden change?

This warmth... This gentle timbre wrapping around me like an embrace...
Is this my version??

What is this?
What's with this beautiful second theme?!


What happened?!
Something's different!

If... If Pang is even capable of playing such warm music, I doubt there is a pianist more terrifying than him.

Because his lack of warmth was his one and only weakness.

But this isn't a bad feeling at all!

What on earth is this?

Am I losing control of myself?!

I should be playing this part more coldly, more severely...

His "evolution" continued...

And as Wei Pang entered the Second Movement...

Kai!

There is no longer anyone capable of standing up against Pang on the piano!!

Ahh...
The song...

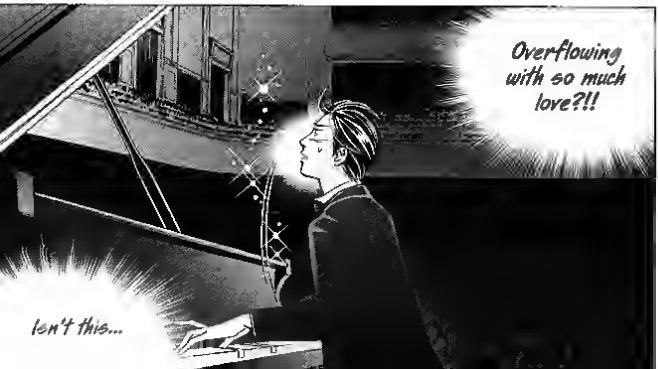
The song just keeps flowing out.

It's as if my body had become one with the spirit of the piece...

How is such a thing even possible with the piano...

I try to make the Second Movement resound coldly...
To suggest the sterility of love, but...
Or is it me that's singing?!
Sensei!

But why are the notes...


Overflowing with so much love?!!
Isn't this...

Isn't this precisely the kind of music that Chopin wished for?!
Sensei!
Did I really have this much love inside me?!

You can go so much further...
So much further...
You have nothing more to fear!
Wei Pang!
So don't be afraid...
This competition makes young people grow...

He wanted to see how the music that he's been seeking...
Would grow from here on...
Ah...
Am I under some sort of spell?
This music...
Sensei said...
He wanted to see where I'd go...

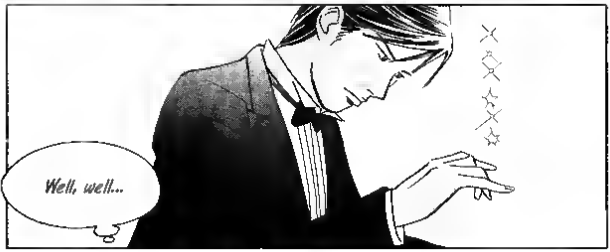
Is much too warm to be coming from me.

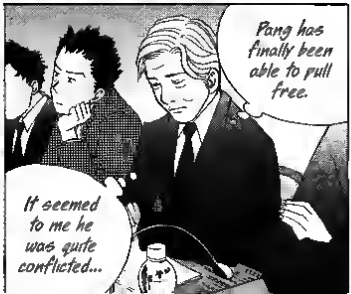
I want to hate his playing, but I'm getting super emotional listening to this

This is bad...

Sniff

THIRD MOVEMENT
"RONDO" VIVACE





Let's see what you've really got!

Discovery END

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Artwork from "Song of the Long March"

Chapter 208 THE LIVE!!

THIRD MOVEMENT
"RONDO" VIVACE

Is the Krakowiak*, a traditional Polish dance...

This movement...

Such liveliness!!

*ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DANCES IN POLAND

These instructions are clearly conveyed through Pang's natural sense of rhythm...

Move! Leap! Have fun!

He's like a different person...

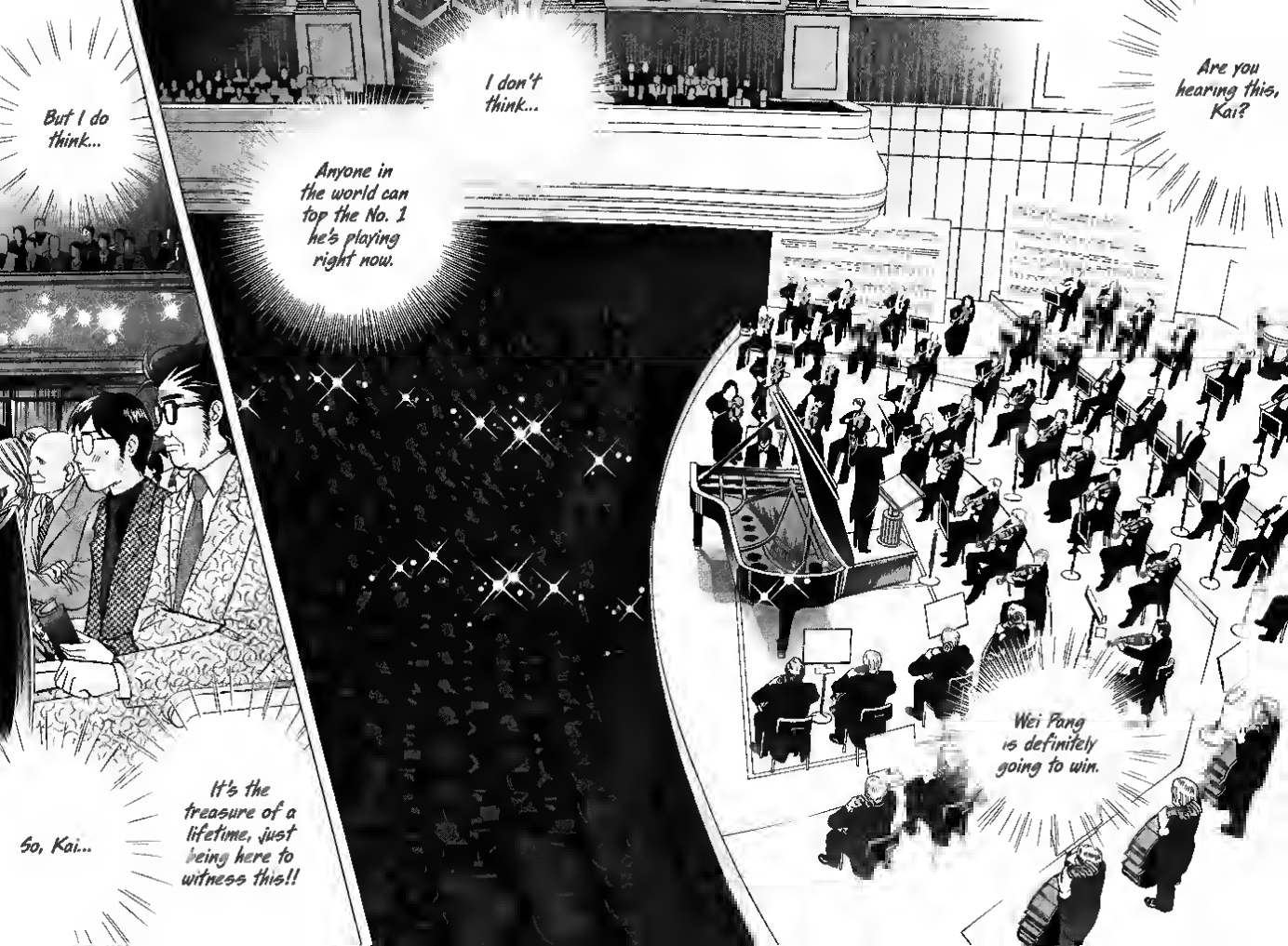
Shuhei also surprised us with his metamorphosis, but...

Where had Fang been hiding this power...?!

This is completely different from the flawless yet cold and intimidating way in which he used to play..

What on earth has triggered this transformation..?!

K..Kai...


But I do think...
I don't think...
Anyone in the world can top the No. 1 he's playing right now.
Are you hearing this, Kai?
So, Kai...
It's the treasure of a lifetime, just being here to witness this!!
Wei Pang is definitely going to win.

By the fact that I'm aiming for the championship, but...

I thought —I wasn't burdened...

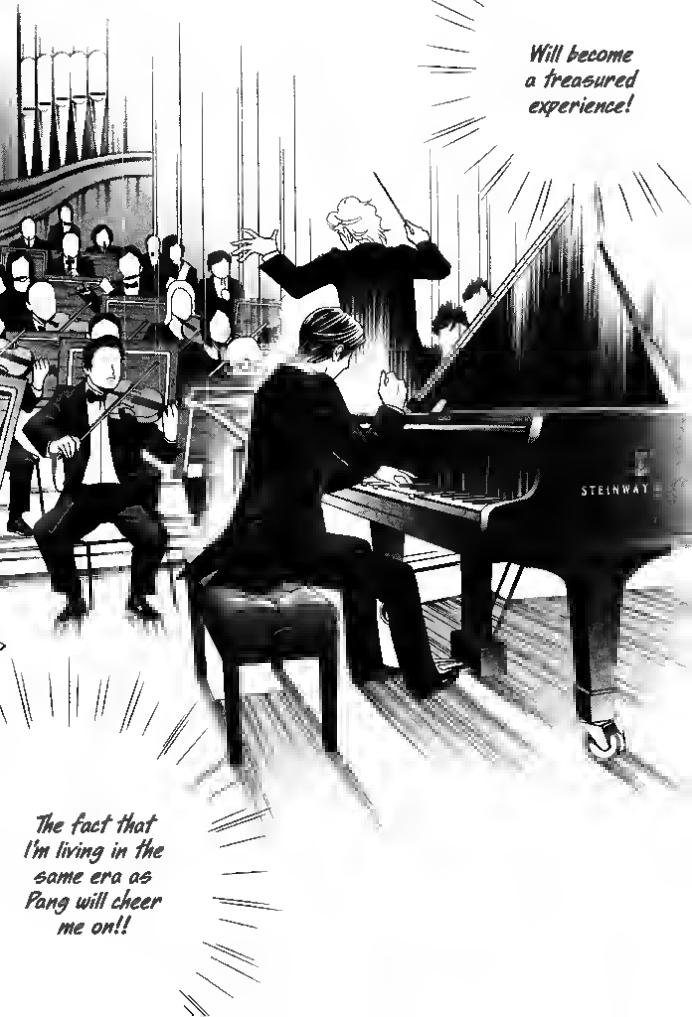
Now I've genuinely stopped caring about the results!

Hearing Pang's performance, my eyes have opened!

I'm sure...

I'm sure, just being able to listen to it live right here...

His playing is incredible!!


Will become a treasured experience!
STEINWAY
The fact that I'm living in the same era as Pang will cheer me on!!

Think of something else!

If it's just a matter of money, there must be some other way!

Forget about the condition of winning the competition that Dr. Nakao named in exchange for the hand surgery...

So, Kai!!

Yeah, that's right! Once this competition is over...

I can even help you out...

Let's visit Dr. Nakao together!!

I can't believe someone like that would be Japan's most famous... or the world's most famous doctor...

After all, that's not the sort of condition that a respected and professional doctor would name!

No... he's the best hand doctor in the whole universe for musicians!

Dr. Nokao is the best hand doctor in the world!

Ichinose-kun...

We won't give up...

We won't give up until Dr. Nakao agrees to do the operation... Even if we have to get down on our hands and knees and beg!

But...
at this sacred
competition...

Using such
crooked things
as wagers should
not be allowed...

Wei
Pang...

That
should've
been obvious,
but...

Wei Pang's piano playing has driven this home in my heart!!

I can't believe I had forgotten such an obvious thing...

I'm so glad!

I'm glad I was able to realize it... before it was my turn to play.

What is with Pang today?!

He's going too far.

Hohoho... It's so enjoyable

Even though it's not my version, his playing is so much fun

Dammit, Pang's just too perfect...

Hmm?
Did that passage sound just a little different?

Because the music is alive...
Well, it doesn't matter.

I'm alive, playing the piano.
That's right...
I'm also alive.

To think that playing the piano could be this enjoyable...

Could make me this happy...

I've never felt this way before.

I can tell that the audience is pulsing along with my music.

This is the first time I've felt anything like this!

Pang... He's playing enjoyable music, and he's enjoying it...

Pang's playing with a smile on his face?

Up till now, I've always believed that if I hadn't been given the chance to play the piano...
That would have been 'death' to me.

I've always...

I don't understand your question...

What would you do if you couldn't play the piano?!

But now it's different.
I've always had the feeling that I was playing the piano on the top of a cliff.
From today onward...
I will live for the sake of playing the piano!!

I even want to thank the woman... No...

My mother, who gave birth to me.

I don't know what you look like, but I've heard that you were a beautiful woman.
I don't know what your last moments were like...
Or what your life was like...
Perhaps your days had been filled with misery, but...
But I...
I will definitely become...
The proof that you had lived.

I swear it to you!!
I'll make you proud...
I'll become such a pianist...
For your sake...
That you had left me in this world...

ムオオオ
ザザ

ワラウオ

Mother...
Thank you for granting me life!

Thank you!
THE LIVE!! END

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MR. HAO!
MR. HAO!
CAN YOU HEAR THE CHEERS?!
YOUR SON GAVE AN INCREDIBLE PERFORMANCE!!
CAN YOU HEAR THAT? MR. HAO!!

Chapter 209 Extraordinary

The applause and cheers that show no signs of dying down...

Are generous praise...

For the brilliant young pianist, Wei Pang!!

As well as a heartfelt cheer...

For the new life that Wei Pang will start living from this moment!!

Haha... I'm sure he'll be fine.

It'd also be a problem if he gets too excited about it.

Though it's Kai we're talking about, so I doubt he'd shy from this challenge, but...

Kai will really need to do his best! He can't afford any slip-ups now.

Sousuke!!

But it's a good thing there's a 30-minute intermission.

That's true!

On the contrary, perhaps it would be good for him to get a little more serious!

He's got a 30-minute intermission to relax!

Kai will be alright.

Kai!!

I think Ichinose will be in trouble, following that performance.

To think Pang would come here and deliver a performance like that...

Are you all right, Kai?

Clap Clap

A-...

Clap Clap

I'm starting to think...

That I've come to Warsaw just to hear this No. 1!

Amazing, Wei Pang!

You'll be playing soon, but you're clapping pretty hard...

Are you sure you should be doing that?

I-Ichinose-kun!!

Ah, Mukai-san!

Now that you mention it, my hands are tingling ...

Huh?

Ah...

Phew...

Jeez. I get what you mean, but come on...

Ahahaha, Just kidding. His performance was Just so amazing...

WHAAAT?!

チ チ チ

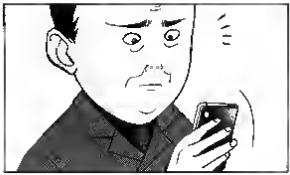
In any case, we'd better go back to our waiting rooms...

It'll get pretty crowded here once it's intermission.

True. It'd be a pain if I get pinned down...

Hmph! This is only natural for him.
It's nothing to get excited about.

Wei Pang really did it, didn't he, Mr. Kong!! Just listen to those cheers!
He's getting a standing ovation!!



Huh, getting so interested in his phone at a time like this. He's way too obsessed with his job

So...

Idiot!
Keep your eyes on him until he dies!!

So, is he dead?
What? He's in the ICU...?

A...Anyway, contact me as soon as he's breathed his last breath.
We're not dealing with an ordinary man here.

Ah...
Staaaare...

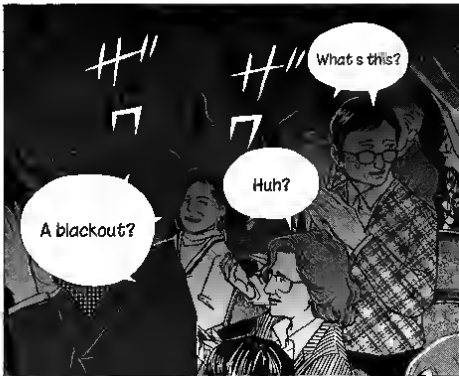
With an ovation like this, you'd better show yourself to the crowd one more time.
Haha... Mr. Wei Pang!

Pook
Huh?!!

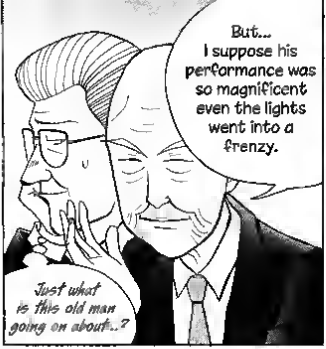
Wei Pang!!

Flash

Flash


What s this?
Huh?
A blackout?

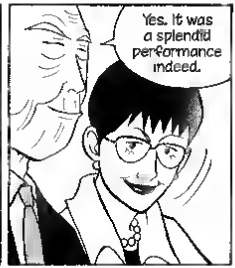
Is...
Is this also part of the show?


But... I suppose his performance was so magnificent even the lights went into a frenzy.
Just what is this old man going on about...?

Of course not... That would just be silly.
Hohoho... Well, I haven't heard anything about it.

There isn't a pianist here who can top that.

I guess this has sealed the deal, huh!


Yes. It was a splendid performance indeed.

That's true! I guess if any of our Polish judges had overheard me just now, they would've been furious.
After all, Lech Szymanowski, Poland's new rising star, is gonna be the grand finale, isn't he.

We don't know that!
There are still two contestants left.

Weber seems to be having trouble adjudicating this performance

That's true...

But still, topping this performance would be difficult, right?

Wei Pang's performance today was utterly flawless.

So I'm sure he had wanted to say, "He is not fit to play Chopin"... and just leave it at that, but..

He was very bothered during the first and second rounds, saying, "It doesn't matter how well he plays, as Pang's music completely overlooks the spirit of Chopin!"

Pang is also my current choice for the first place.

Pang

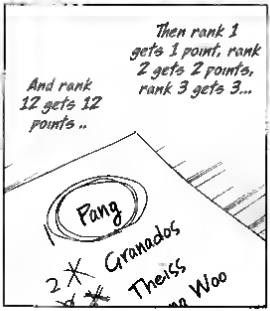
Theiss Granados

His concerto just now was more than enough to make up for the previous rounds, and has conveyed Chopin perfectly!

And is a comprehensive assessment of all the performances.

Takes into account not only the final performance, but also the ones in the first and second rounds...

The adjudication for this final round...



Oh my, he's on his third curtain call...

There is a reason why we use this method, though...

The one I'm really looking forward to today...

Is the next performance; Kai Ichinose.

But you know, Kristina...

Hm?

I'm surprised...

To be honest, I was thinking the same thing.

Ah, this is just between us!

It has nothing to do with the ranking or whatever...

...What do you think about Ichinose Kai?

Anyway, Kristina...

Even back then...

Ichinose had seemed extraordinary since the very beginning. He's the only one who stood out from the rest of the contestants.

I didn't say it to Youichirou at the time, but...

I wonder why I feel this way...

This has nothing to do with giving points or adjudicating.

Even I don't understand why I thought that.

To figure it out myself!

I want to listen to Ichinose's performance one more time...

Whoa! Look, Ichinose-kun, look!

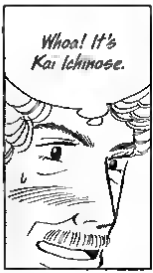
OK!

Satoru Makai

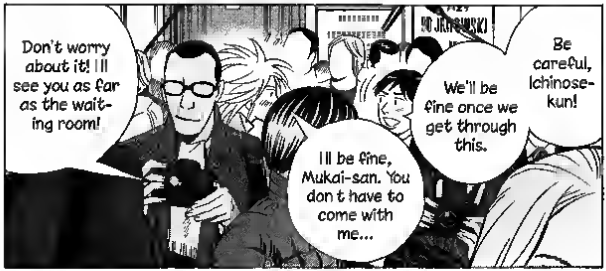
Yeah.

There's a ton of press waiting for him to come out!

Just look at that. That's Wei Pang for you.


Whoa! It's Kai Ichinose.

Ah! Sorry!
Nah, it was my fault!


Don't worry about it! I'll see you as far as the waiting room!
I'll be fine, Mukai-san. You don't have to come with me...
We'll be fine once we get through this.
Be careful, Ichinose-kun!

...But our rule is to leave the contestants in peace until they have performed.

Oh! Kai Ichinose!
It's Ichinose!
What? Ichinose?
He's with Mukai.

Yeah! It was a pretty close call after the second round!

Ahaha, déja vu.

Isn't this our second time getting sandwiched during the intermission?

Hmm? Come to think of it, Ichinose-kun...

Ah! It's Ichinose!

In any case, having listened to Pang's No. 1, all my doubts are gone!

Mukai-kun!

Watching a performance like that really does make you sober up or something...

Going after Ichinose-kun in the second round was just like that for me...

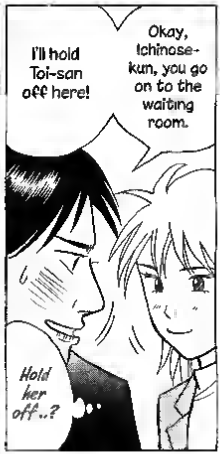
Great! That's the best thing that can happen!

Yeah! I was really lucky!

Ah! This is my girlfriend that I told you about before...
Toi Aoi-san!

Crap! It's Toi-san!!

Okay, see you later!


I'll hold Toi-san off here!
Okay, Ichinose-kun, you go on to the waiting room.
Hold her off..?

Ichinose-kun is about to give his performance soon! Haven't I told you I'd try to ask him for all that stuff after he's done?!

You're just after an autograph, right?

You can't. No autographs, and no photos either.

Come on, what are you doing all the way up here, Toi-san?

Chuckle

Umm, if she wants to ask me something. .

Ah...

I just happened to see you two getting out of the hall, so I found myself chasing you down..

What have I got wrong?

You've got it all wrong.

Not at all! You're my No. 1, Mukai-kun... Then it's Ichinose-kun...

Besides, you're here to cheer for Pang aren't you, Toi-san?!

Seriously, don't mind her!!

Ohhhhh, no no no!! Don't worry about it!

I told you I was just interested in him because he was my friend's little brother...

The truth is... before the competition even began, she was rooting for Szymanowski!

Oh, don't even listen to her. Girls are really fickle.

Ah... That's Lech's elder sister...

That's right! So I'm friends with Amelia...

So it's already been 7 or 8 years I guess?

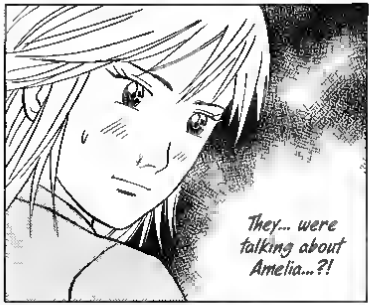
Ah.. Toi-san has been living in Poland since middle school because of her parents' work.

That's where Amelia died.

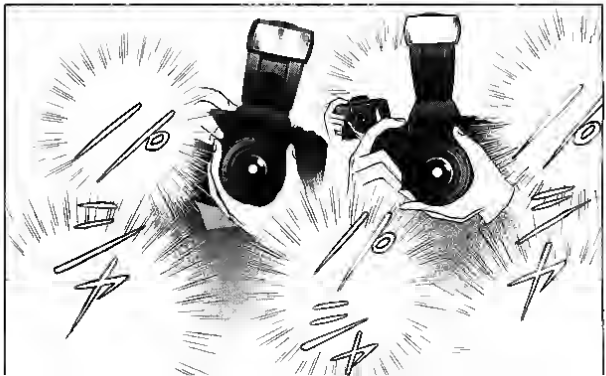
Amelia?

Do you know Amelia?
Oh?
So Amelia... is Lech's elder sister?
Hm?

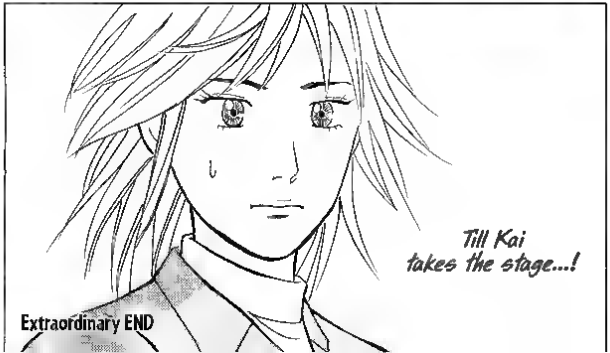
Just now, they...

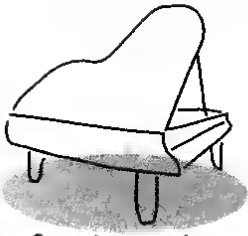

They... were talking about Amelia...?!

Ah! Lech!



Only 30 minutes...
Will you be all right..?
Kai.


Till Kai takes the stage...!
Extraordinary END



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Chapter 210

Amelia

It was a shock for me as well.

Why was I able to play a No 1 like that?

I'm still so excited I don't even know what to ask...

Haha... I'm* also very thrilled myself.

*P/N: HE'S USING THE PRONOUN 'BOKU' HERE, AS OPPOSED TO HIS USUAL, MORE ARROGANT 'ORE'

Ever since that moment, something has changed inside me.

It's like I'm seeing the world in a whole new light...

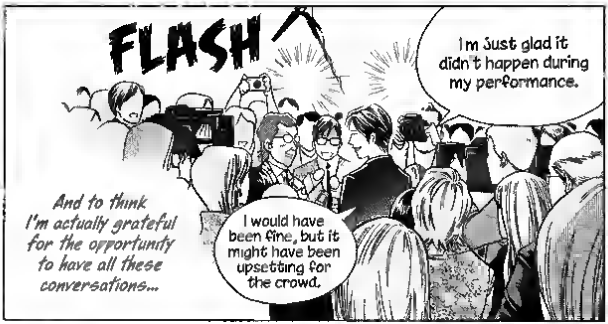
In the past, I would always get frustrated with all these reporters who hadn't done their homework...

And deflect their questions by blathering vague gibberish.

Oh, I'm afraid I don't know.
Maybe the technicians were trying to spice things up...

Was that blackout during your curtain call an accident?
Or was that part of the show?

But now, answering each and every question...
Fills me with joy...


FLASH
I'm just glad it didn't happen during my performance.
And to think I'm actually grateful for the opportunity to have all these conversations...
I would have been fine, but it might have been upsetting for the crowd.

Can.. Can it be fixed?
They say we pushed the lights too hard so they broke down!
Something wrong with the conduction?
Idiot, we've got to fix it!!
Something's slipped out of place.

Holy Christ! How can we have lighting problems at a time like this?!
You've gotta be kidding me!

Wasn't Pang's performance just amazing?

It was even better than I had expected.

Putting in a 30-minute intermission here really was a mercy.

Can you imagine trying to play in the afterglow of that?

Might not be enough.

30 minutes...

Don't die down soon, Kai, who will be playing next..

If Pang's lingering presence... and the excitement he left behind...

Ah...

He looks as calm as ever...

It's Ajino-sensei!

Will have to admit that Kai has no hope of winning
But after watching Pang's performance, surely even Sensei...

AH!!

.....Huh?

I couldn't find a single trace of Ajino-sensei's music.
Throughout Wei Pang's entire performance...
Not a single note.
That's never happened before.

For the first time, I didn't sense Ajino's influence in Pang's playing.

What happen-ed?
What ...

This time though.. His playing was warm all right, but Ajino's silhouette has completely vanished
I have always thought that no matter how much Pang's playing resembles Ajino's, he could never convey the same warmth through his music.

Could it be that Wei Pang...
Has surpassed Ajino Sousuke...?!

What on earth happened?

Just how much further can he go?

Has Wei Pang taken yet another step forward?

Kai...

Will you be all right?

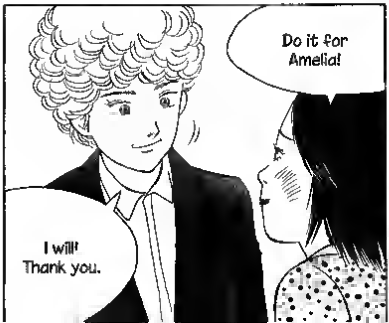
Kai is finally going to perform next...

Until Kai takes the stage...

Only 30 minutes left...

Hi, Aoi!

Hi!!


Do it for Amelia!
I will! Thank you.

Do your best in the final act, Lech!

Hi Lech!

Glance

I was wondering why Szymanowski would show up here...

But his waiting room is right next to Ichinose's, isn't it?

Powodzenia!

Powodzenia!!!

Hi, Kai. Powodzenia!*

* POLISH FOR GOOD LUCK

All right then, I'd better be on my way too!

Ah... Yeah.

Was it just me, or did Szymanowski just shoot Ichinose a glare...

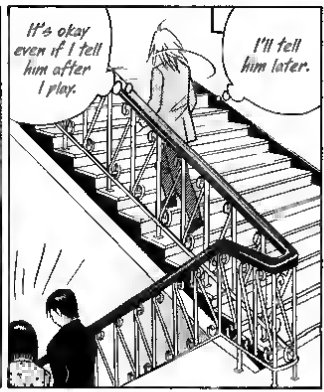
Huh?

Please do your best!!
See you!
All right, see you later!
I-Ichinose-kun. This is your last performance, so...
Be sure to enjoy it as much as you can!
I'll definitely enjoy it!
I will!
Turn
Mukai-sa-...
Ah...
Crap! I forgot to tell Mukai-san something really important!

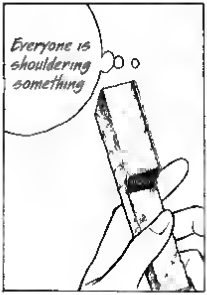
Actually, Amelia should've been the one participating in this competition...
It really is a tragedy.

It's already been 5 years...
Since Amelia went into a coma...

I was so excited about Wei Pang's performance I completely forgot to tell him.
That was my mistake ...


It's okay even if I tell him after I play.
I'll tell him later.

Amelia's been in a coma for 5 years...
WHOOSH
"That's where Amelia died."
"What? You mean... right here?"



Everyone is shouldering their own burden, heavy or not.

It's not just me, and it's not just Wei Pang...

Are you all right, Lech?

Are you really feeling better?

Roll Roll

You go on ahead.

I just need to be alone for a moment.

I'm fine. No problem...

I asked them to put you in the waiting room downstairs. Are you able to move?

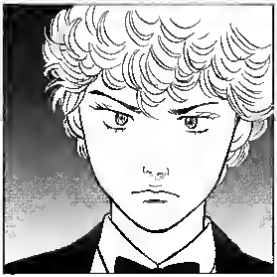
They were talking about Amelia.

What were they saying about her?

BAM
Nod
Bam
Lech... Szymanowski...?

Kai, can I have ten minutes of your time?
No!

What the hell?! You gave me quite a scare, Lech!
Ever heard of knocking?



Five minutes!
And not a second longer!

Well now. I wonder what's going on here...
Amelia END

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Chapter 211 Promise

What?

How much did you hear?

You think I have time to be prying into your life?

I... I'm going on stage in 30 minutes.

You're an asshole and it pisses me off, but...

Now that you've heard about it, it saves me a lot of talking.

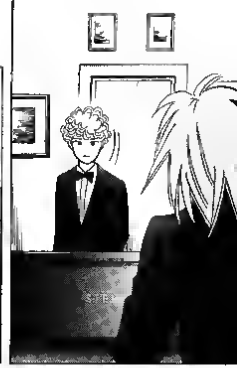
Just now you were prying about Amelia, weren't you?

.....

It was just a coincidence... I just happened to learn that Amelia is your sister.

So I made a promise with her...
Amelia...
Was in an accident... and hasn't woken up for 5 years.
If I win this competition, Amelia has to wake up!
She agreed. She said, "If you can do that, I'll wake up!"

I'm telling the truth.
At first... Whenever I brought that up, Dad would fly into a rage.



ENOUGH WITH YOUR LIES!!
HOW CAN SHE TALK TO YOU WHILE SHE'S IN A COMA LIKE THAT?!!

Warn me...
Liars always have it coming!!
You hear me!! it will happen!!

I'm begging you, please stop telling those lies.
Later, he would beg me...
Threaten me...
Someday you'll call the wrath of heaven down on your head!!

When it's my turn to play, I can't make a sound on the piano...
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
No matter how frantically I move my fingers, no sound can be heard... It's a nightmare.
I kept having...
The same dream, over and over again.

When I did finally fall asleep,

The nightmare would be there for me, every time.

I tried my hardest not to fall asleep, but...

Heading up to the days of the competition...

I was always having this dream, and it scared me to death...

When...

[illegible] fall on me...?!

I'm the only one Amelia would talk to.

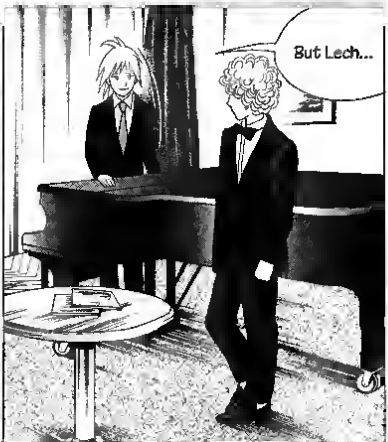
I know everyone thinks it's a lie, but...

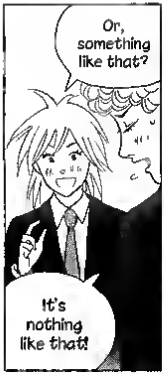
I think that sort of thing is possible.

No...

Everyone... is shouldering something.

The fact that each of us has a 'promise' to keep...
Just gives us a reason to play our very best! That's all.

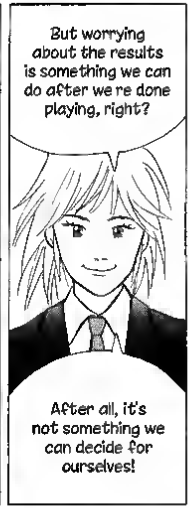

But Lech...


Or, something like that?
It's nothing like that!

If we can all perform to the very best of our ability...
Then it'll be the same as 'winning' for me, and for you.

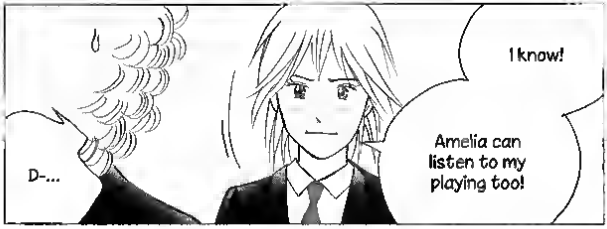
Haha... As if.
It's too early to tell!
After all, the two of us haven't played yet!

What's that? Coming up with excuses for when you lose?
You think Wei Pang has already won?


But worrying about the results is something we can do after we're done playing, right?
After all, it's not something we can decide for ourselves!

There's no way we can hold back as we try to surpass ourselves!

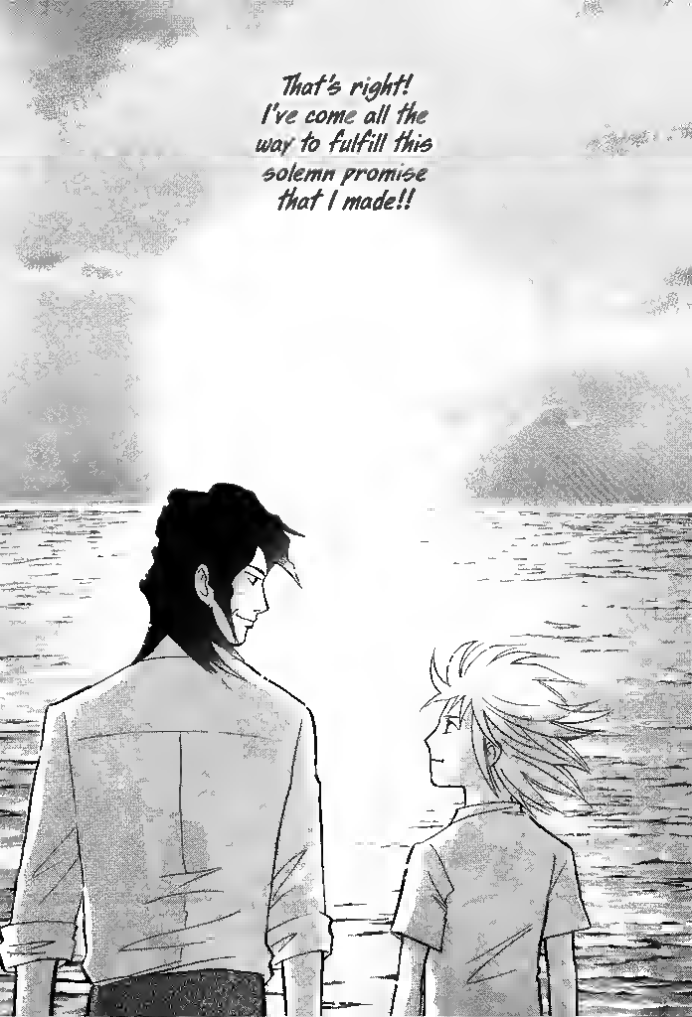
How could we hold back?
So then what is this? A battle declaration... telling me you won't hold back?
This is a chance... to play the piano better than we ever have before!


I know!
Amelia can listen to my playing too!
D-...

Oh, it's got something to do with me.

Don't be ridiculous!
What's any of this got to do with you?

"I want you to promise me,"
Obviously it's not just Amelia.
I want everyone on earth to listen to my playing...
That's why I'm here.
"Let the world hear the music that only Kai can play!"


That's right! I've come all the way to fulfill this solemn promise that I made!!

You're here so that your very best piano playing can reach Amelia!

It's the same for you, isn't it, Lech?

FLU

SH

Um... I don't know if I quite fit that description.

You got brought up being so straightforward and honest... Wish I could be like that.

Haha...

Must be nice, Kai... being a rich boy without a care in the world.

Well, my time's up. I'm off!

Hmm?

Hey... That was quite a decent lie you told there.

Let's play to the very best of our ability today!!

Lech! Powodzenia!

But... My piano may make no sound at all!

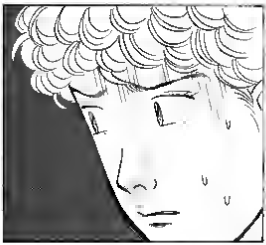
Powodzenia, Kai!

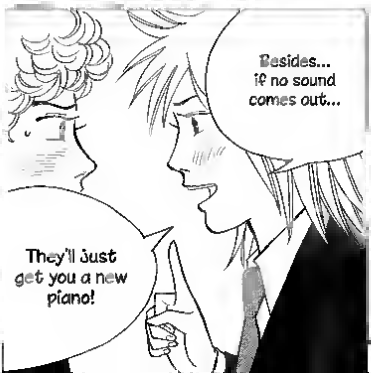
CLICK

Turn
Huh?!

What are you talking about?
Don't tell me... you mean that whole 'divine retribution' thing?

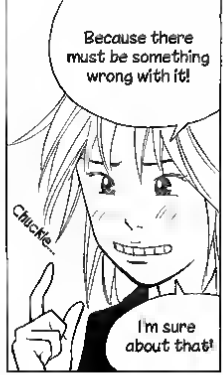
Ohhhhh come on~
Are you a kid or what~

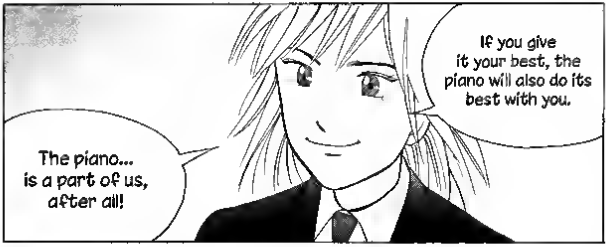



Besides... if no sound comes out...
They'll just get you a new piano!

There's no way that's going to happen, Lech!!
There's no such thing!

And let me tell you this...
You may be a liar, but the piano never lies.
CHOPIN


Because there must be something wrong with it!
Chuckle...
I'm sure about that!


If you give it your best, the piano will also do its best with you.
The piano... is a part of us, after all!

You should already know that, Lech!

I swear it!

Do you swear, Kai?!

Do...

The piano isn't going to punish you!

What you just said?!

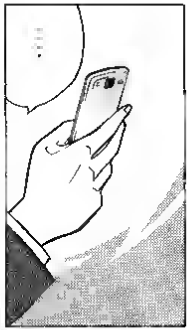
In the tiny tiny tiny chance that Lech really does deserve punishment...

It won't be today, and it won't be from a piano!

Promise?

If they're only exchanging words of encouragement, it shouldn't have taken more than 3 minutes...
I wonder what's going on...

5 minutes...



Powodzenia, Lech!
Powodzenia, Kai!

What is... the piano really makes no sound?

Ah! Kai!

Promise?!

Promise!

Pfft

Get 'em to change it right away!!

That piano's busted!

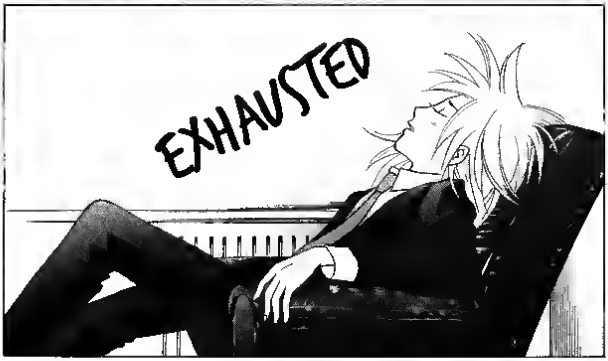
As many times as you want!

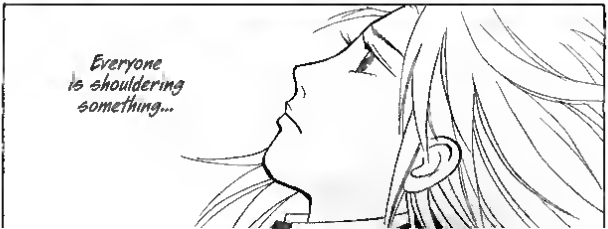
Promise one more time?

?

Heh.

Nod





Kai!
How are you? All ready?

Knock
Knock

Yep!
I'm all set!
Promise END

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Yep!

I'm all set!

Chapter 212 In the Country Where Chopin Was Born

Almost forgot my precious!
Fumble
Fumble

Hang on a sec!
Ah!

.....
Wriggle
Wriggle

Now everything's perfect!!
Haha!

Ahh. These are...

The gloves that those people gave you last night as a gift...

Yeah.

I want to have them make their debut here.

Haha... I see.

I'm gonna wear them to keep my hands warm till it's my turn!

Amamiya told me a lot of top pianists do that too.

Hoha.

In other words, Kai also fits the description, eh?

But they aren't exclusively for pianists. Anyone can wear gloves when they feel cold in winter.

That's true...

But I'm doing it because these gloves are really special to me...

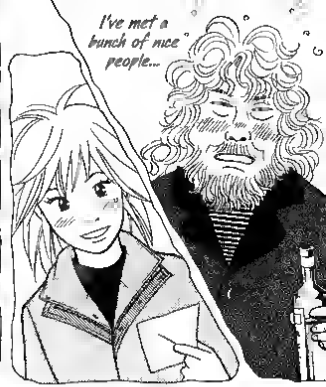
Yeah.

They will.

I see...

Then they'll certainly bring you a lot of wonderful memories from now on.

Two months ago... I left Japan for the first time in my life...
And set foot here in Poland... The country where Chopin was born...
OLD TOWN MARKET PLACE. WARSAW



At long last, I will be playing Chopin in the Finals!

NASTROJ

Only 20 minutes left till Kai's turn!

Dammit! I'm so nervous I don't even dare use the loo.

Huhhh?

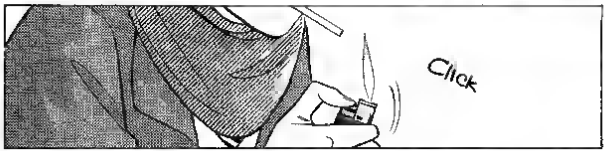
Wojew phaned me and said the last ticket got sold right before his eyes after he d waited in the line for three hours.

You can't get in without a ticket?

For real?

Of course you can't. Duh!

NARODOWA
PHILHARMONIC HALL
Then... What's Wojew doing over there if he can't get in?


Click

Ahh, silly me. Just look at you.
You must be here for the last performer, Szymanowski, eh?
Hey buddy, are you here for Wei Pang?

In that case, I have a favor to ask, buddy...

Please let me watch Kai Ichinose's performance! He's the next to play!

Common sense, ain't it?!

That's only natural! We Poles gotta support one of our own!

Lech Szymanowski... Poland's proud new star!

You'll only have to lend me your ticket till then!

Just sit tight and take a nice long drag from your cig during that time...

I'll rush right back and return your ticket after I'm done!

Huhhhhhhhhh?! No waaaaaaay!!

'Cause I don't support anyone but Ichinose!

I understand how you feel...

Huh?

But I'm afraid I can't help you!

Grumble

Wojew!

Wojew!

Just give up and go back!

In any case, we have to hurry and find a place with TV.

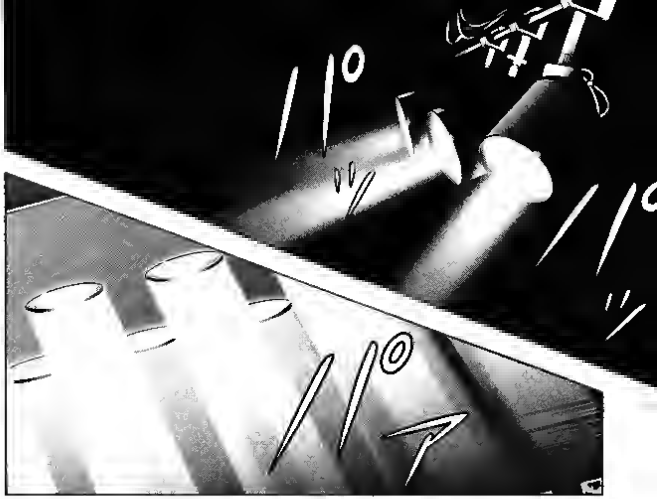
We only have 20 minutes left!

We won't hear a thing hanging around here!

Chief! Everything's going according to plan! It's gonna start soon!
TVP
Of course it is!

The lights seem to have malfunctioned... When Pang went back on stage...
I think... it's just something to do with the wiring.

What the hell...?
Fix it now!
Hey! We're on a tight schedule!
TVP



Hurray!!
All...
All fixed!!!

Gosh... That sure was nerve-wracking.
That took a few years off my lifespan!
There are still two performances left...
Phew... We got it done...
Just 15 minutes before show time.
What a relief...
Nothing can go wrong during this national event, held once every five years!
Huh?
All fixed?

Oh!
They're fixed!

That's great!!
I don't think I can play without any lights!
I know, right?
I won't know what to do if I can't even see the conductor's baton!
Ahaha

15 minutes left?
Then it's time I went to fetch Ichinose!

I only noticed just now...
Other than the gloves, everything you're wearing is hand-me-down.

Haha...

Now that you mention it...
Ah.

In Ajino's now vacant ancestral home, where you can see the ocean...

Both my suit and my leather shoes...
Were originally Ajino's stage attire.

Thank god I was too attached to throw them all away.

There is an impressive collection of clothes.

I... I've been dreaming...

Of building up such a huge collection of my own.

In order to do the alterations,

We invited the lady in charge of the costumes at P☆Club over...

We left them all with her.

Since Ajino had no more use of those dress clothes...

It suits you! With all these frills and ribbons...

You wear this kind of thing every day at the club, right?

This and that...

But what do you think of this...

Because...

Hahd... Yeah I did like that kind of thing back then.

Sensei had some unexpectedly flashy tastes.

To this day, I still regret doing that.

That Ajimo will never return to the stage again.

That's practically admitting...

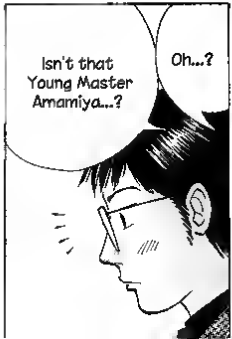
Are you ready?!

Knock Knock

15 minutes to go...
Dad...

ガヤ
ガヤ

Gosh... I'd better go back to my seat first.
Ahh.. He's pinned down by all sorts of people...


Isn't that Young Master Amamiya...?
Oh...?

It isn't even time yet, but there is already such a huge crowd!
And it seems to be getting even bigger...

It has been a long time, but I remember you very well.

I am Shiraishi.

Huh?

The name does ring a bell...

Shi... Shirai-shi-san... Who's that??

Uhh...

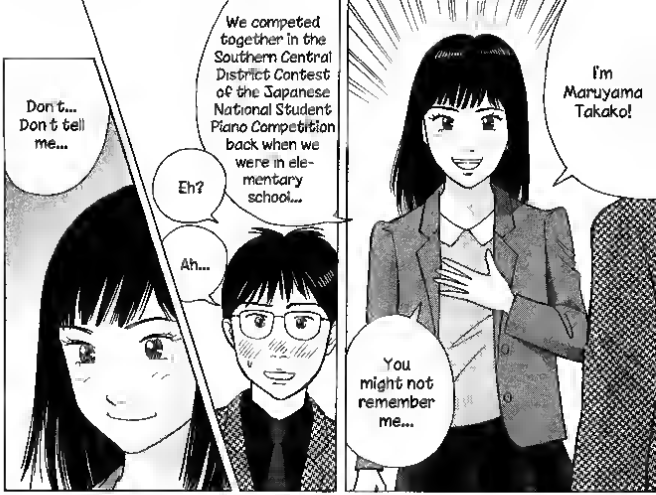
Shiraishi Yukie.

It's been a long time!

Ahh... Amamiya-kun!

Huh?

Little Miss! Young Master Amamiya is over here!!



In the Country Where Chopin Was Born_END

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Chapter 213 Goodbye, Goodbye. I'm Off.

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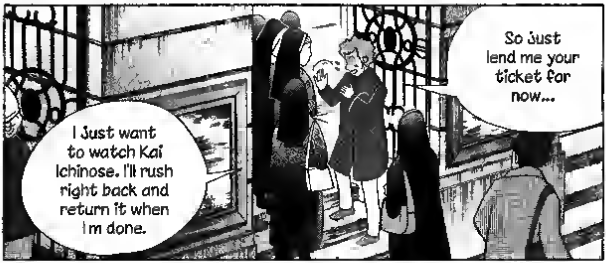
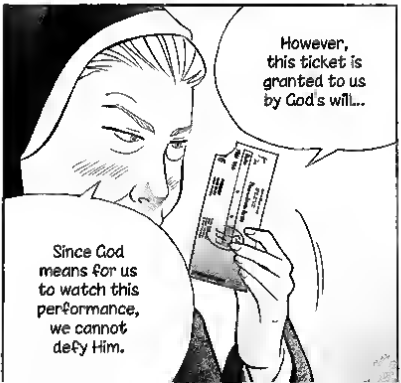

So just lend me your ticket for now...
I just want to watch Kai Ichinose. I'll rush right back and return it when I'm done.


However, this ticket is granted to us by God's will...
Since God means for us to watch this performance, we cannot defy Him.

I see what you mean.

If I remember correctly, there is a large monitor nearby where you can watch the live broadcast!

Yes... I've heard about that too.

Please pardon our rudeness.

I suggest you hurry and find a television!

Hurry! It's starting in 15 minutes!

We can't be seen smoking...

If they catch word of you having a puff while using us as shields, we'll all get stuffed by the other sisters!

So please try your best to lay off the smokes!

May God bless you and keep you...

You're here too... Uh...

Maruyama-san...

Have you been here in Warsaw all this time? Since the very beginning...?

Nope. We only arrived two days ago!

But... Uh... Let's forget the "Toilet Princess" thing...

Just call me Takako!

It was a mean nickname, wasn't it?

Ah... Sorry about that...

I hear even the locals have no chance of getting their hands on one...

You... You actually managed to get tickets!

Two days ago... That's the day before yesterday?!

Huh?

Yeah...

That does seem to be the case!

But when we learned that Kai got into the final round, my piano teacher...

So, I regretfully had to cancel the tickets. I was going to just make do and watch the live broadcast on the internet...

Actually, this competition clashes with some important dates at school and I'm not supposed to be absent...

I have them!!

I didn't cancel the ones for the Finals!

I want to go! But the tickets...

What?

T-Takako! We're going to the Finals!!

I'm going! I'm going! Of course I'm going!!

I figured you could go if Ichinose really managed to get into the final round... So I've been praying for that to happen! If you ...

Indeed! But all was well when we learned that Young Master Kai would be playing on the final day!

Right?

We only started watching yesterday because of our flight...

D...Don't be...
I'm really so...
I'm so sorry I couldn't see your performance live, Amamiya-kun...
You're here for Kai's performance...
I see.
Was absolutely marvelous!
Your second performance...
That's nonsense.
I made so many mistakes too...
It's only natural that I got eliminated.
The kind that's no different than background music, no matter how skillfully played...
And the kind that slams right into my heart!
There are two different kinds of piano playing for me.

I only felt sorry because my chance of watching you live got taken away!

But the second one was utterly mind-blowing... It made me go like, "What on earth happened?!"

Your first performance did sound pretty plain...

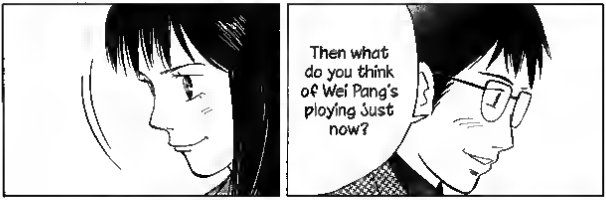
That was some really unique piano playing.

The kind that marks a change in a musician's life...

Huh?

Ah...

One day, I'll make a wonderful music critic!
My ears really are something.
Told you.
Smile
You can tell?
You...


Then what do you think of Wei Pang's playing just now?

Kai's chances are? He's playing next...
How good do you think...
I thought so...
It has completely taken over my head!
It's still echoing relentlessly in my heart!

Because it's pointless to give Kai's playing a rank!

What?

He probably doesn't stand a chance...

But he doesn't actually have to win.

C'mon... You talk too much.

The Little Miss has always been besotted with Young Master Kai's music.

Huh?

That's why it's silly to give it a rank.

Whenever I listen to Kai play... I get this incomparable sense of happiness!

It doesn't quite cover it... How should I put this...?

Your terrible oversimplification makes Kai's playing sound cheap and worthless.

An incomparable sense of happiness, huh....

Still, this is a competition, Little Miss!
Yeah, that's true!

Get out of my way, peasants!!
Dammit! Outta my way! Outta my way!

Am I sick or something?
Nah, it must be the nerves!
It's only been five minutes but I need the toilet again no matter how many times I've already gone.

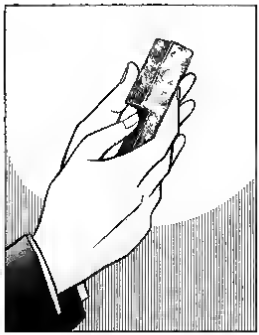
SLAM
Damn you... Ichinose you bastard... Why are you such a pain in the ass?!

Ten more minutes till Maria's... I mean Ichinose's performance...
I can make it!

W...
Watch it!
I...I'm sorry!

Just to watch Ichinose? Damn, that's neat!
Huh? You came two days ago?
Saga-sensei!! Fancy meeting you here!
What the! Is it isn't Shiba-kun!!
Ah... You're here with your Little Miss?

.....



Haha... I guess he's nervous.
Thankfully there's a toilet in this waiting room.

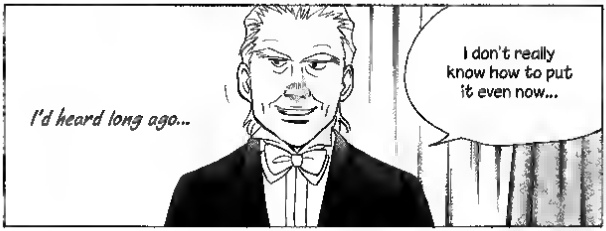
Kai's taking his time in the toilet, isn't he?

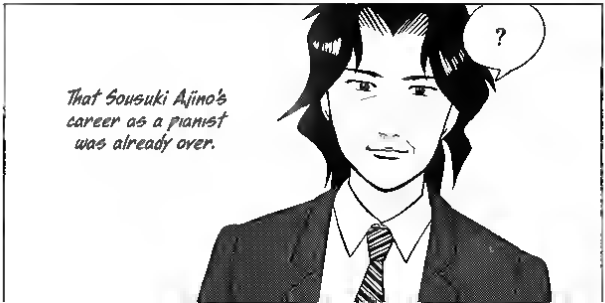
Mr. Asino.

If he couldn't get some alone time...

Is...
Was actually my late father.
Is that so?

You know... it's such a coincidence.
Lukasz Kord, the conductor in the competition you joined 25 years ago...


I'd heard long ago...
I don't really know how to put it even now...


That Sousuki Ajino's career as a pianist was already over.
?

"Your piano playing...

Cannot be described even with a thousand words...

My father had always lamented the fact that he couldn't perform with you in the Finals...

After you got eliminated in the first round.

"It is my dearest wish to perform with you..." were all what he had wanted to tell you.

"I wonder how it would turn out if you could perform together with my orchestra..."

I have always wanted to relay his words if I ever got the chance.

But then... I suppose you'd find it hard to appreciate them now...

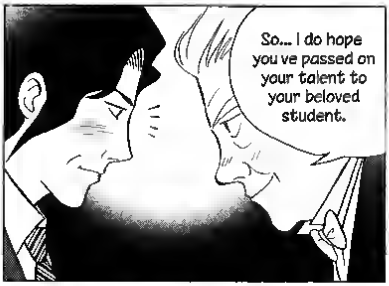
Your piano playing must've been incredibly expressive for him to say that...

He wasn't the kind to talk a lot about his work at home... So it had really made a strong impression on me...

It is a huge honor to win such praise from Mr. Łukasz Kord.

I am very grateful to hear that!

Not at all.



Clatter
Sorry for taking so long.

He was someone with whom I had wished to perform together from the bottom of my heart.

Yes!

Haha...
Is your stomach all right?

Do please enjoy my performance with Kai!
Thanks. I will.

Then I'll head downstairs first. I'll come back again later!
See you again, Mr. Asino!!

I should also head back to my seat...

Okay! Got it!

Kai! Do your best and show them your...

He may have grown taller, and his hands may have gotten bigger, but he hasn't changed one bit in this regard.

You'll be fine! Believe in yourself!

He's been trying to pass it off as a handshake in this competition...

Kai... has had the habit of gripping my clothes or my hand when he's nervous or anxious since he was little.

Hold onto this, Sensei...

Hehe.

?

Even Rei-chan would borrow it from me when things got rough for her...

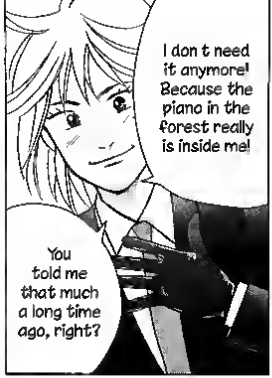
This thing has been my amulet ever since that time.

It will be giving Ajino Sousuke strength from now on.

I made sure it's gotten the right idea!

Mm-hmm. That's right!

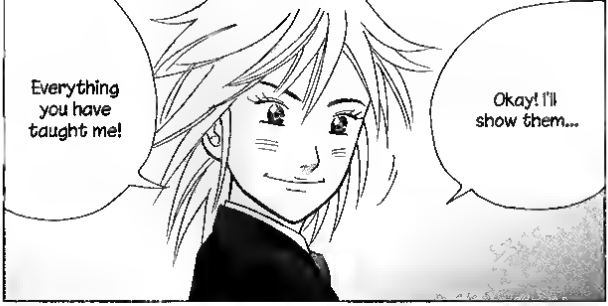
Haha... So you were only lending it to Reiko-san when she had it.

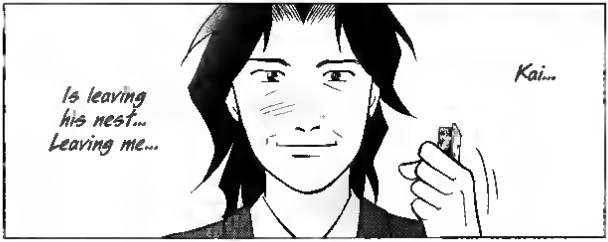

I don t need it anymore! Because the piano in the forest really is inside me!
You told me that much a long time ago, right?

Huh?
I've been chanting that to it in the toilet!

I'm... off to play...
Watch me in the auditorium with that little guy!

Kai...
All right! Go!


Everything you have taught me!
Okay! I'll show them...


Is leaving his nest... Leaving me...
Kai...

Kai!
Go!

And seize the future!
SALAKONCERTOWA
Goodbye. Goodbye. I'm Off. END

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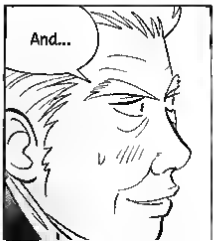
Chapter 214 Watched Over by the Big Tree

Is what you're saying true?

Then, the 'Piano of the Forest'... is...
Literally a... piano that was left in a forest?!


And...

Yep!
Though... to be more precise, it was 'dumped' there.

Haha...

Well, when I was really tiny, I wasn't exactly 'playing' it.

And you'd been playing that piano since you were 3 years old...

I heard about it from Mr. Ajino just now, and I was genuinely surprised...

I saw in your profile... that you had Sousuke Ajino and 'Piano in the Forest' listed as your instructors.

I thought it must have been a nickname for one of your piano teachers, so I let it slide.

But... I doubt two grown adults would make up that kind of lie...

To think a piano could have survived outside like that for several years...

Honestly, it's hard to believe, but...

The piano was protected by a great big tree.

Until I met Ajino-sensei, it was like a playmate and guardian deity to me.

Because I want to leave it behind somewhere in words.

The reason I wrote down "Piano in the Forest" on my profile is...

If not for that piano, you wouldn't be here.

No. This is the truth—

Will they think I'm messing around ...?

When I showed it to Ajino-sensei, I was sure he was going to scold me.

The order is just fine like this!

Haha... But you've got the order backwards here

You should put "Piano in the Forest" before my name

Ah!

That's true, I could have done that.

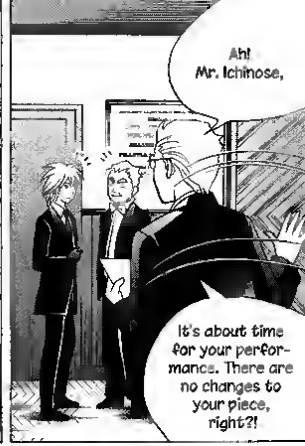
You've got that right!

You could write a whole book just about that!

Yeah!

That piano is something special.

....
The piano was...


Ah! Mr. Ichinose,
It's about time for your performance. There are no changes to your piece, right?!

Protected
By a big tree...

All right. We would now like to welcome the next performer.

Oh! Looks like it's time.

Clap Clap Clap Clap Clap

It's Young Master Kai!

The next performance will be given by No. 37.

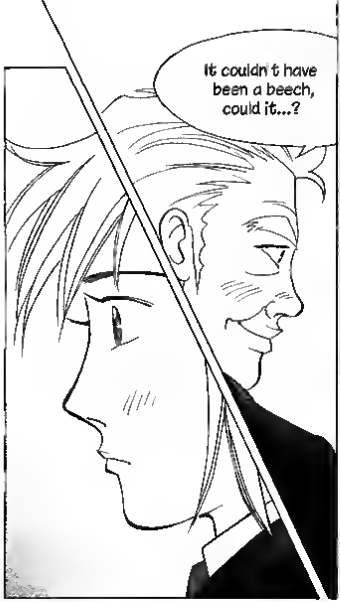
Kai Ichinose, Japan.

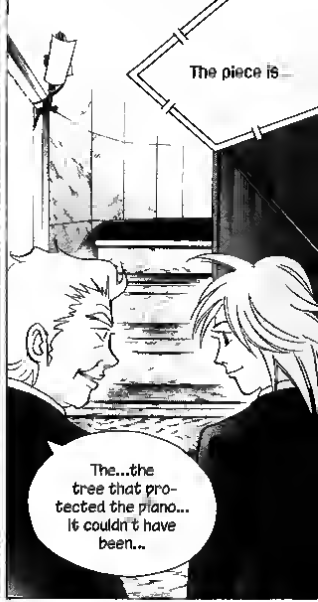
Ah!

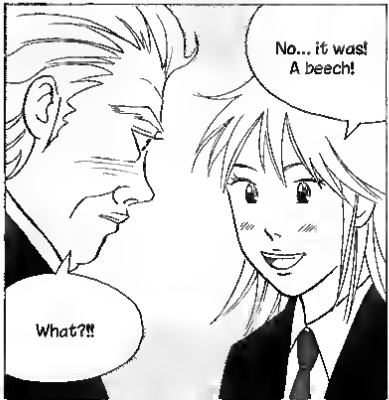
Indeed.

Are you all right? Ready to go?

Yep! Let's do our best!


It couldn't have been a beech, could it...?


The piece is...
The...the tree that protected the piano... It couldn't have been...

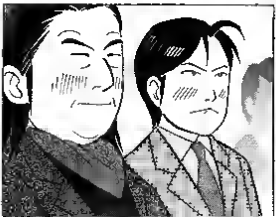

No... it was! A beech!
What?!!

Haha...
Of course not. That would be...

Piano Concerto No. 1..
That's amazing, Maestro! You got half of it right!
Haha..
I'd say that's a good omen.
in E minor, Op. 11.
It was a really strange tree...
An oak and beech crossbreed!

First Movement...
Allegro Maestoso,

Second Movement...
"Romance" Larghetto,



Third Movement...
"Rondo" Vivace...
You ready?
JAPAN, 3 AM
Party Club

It's gonna be just like making a Spirit Bomb in Dragon Ball!!

We're gonna get all our energy together and send it to Kai-sensei!!

YEAH!

ARE YOU READY?!!

Ahaha

Leave it to a grade schooler to be so energetic ever in the middle of the night!

We've got it already so get out of the way! We can't see and we can't hear either...!

How many times are you going to say that, Daiki?!

His piano of choice is the Steinway

Do your best, Kai!

With those hands...

Kai...

Kai...

Seize the future with those hands...

No. 37, Kai Ichinose.

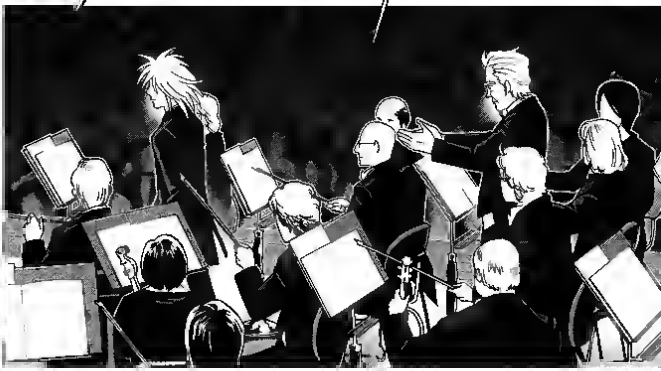
Seize your freedom!!

Japan!

Young Master Kaaa!

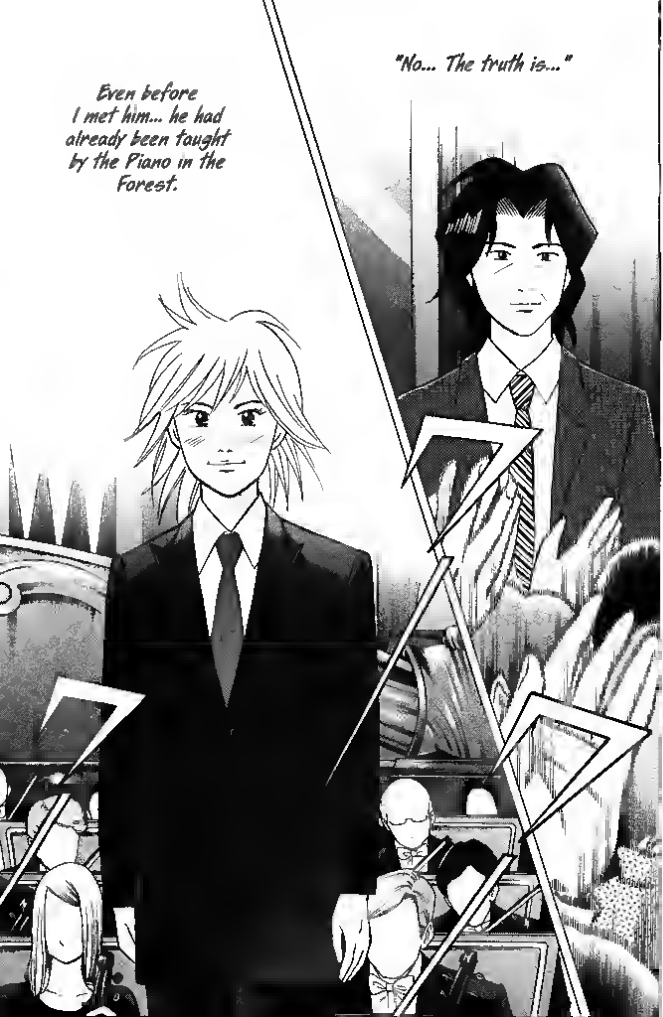
Maestro...

Antoni Kord.



"So... I do hope you've passed on your talent..."

"To your beloved student."


Even before I met him... he had already been taught by the Piano in the Forest.
"No... The truth is..."

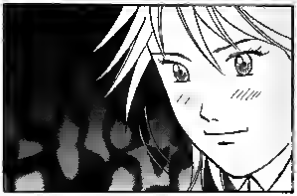
Maestro...
Kai was not raised by me...

It was the forest.
It was the forest that raised him.
Young Master Kaaaai!!!

Well then, let us begin!

Silence...

Kai Ichinose...



Let's have a conversation the likes of which no one has ever seen!

Watched Over by the Big Tree END

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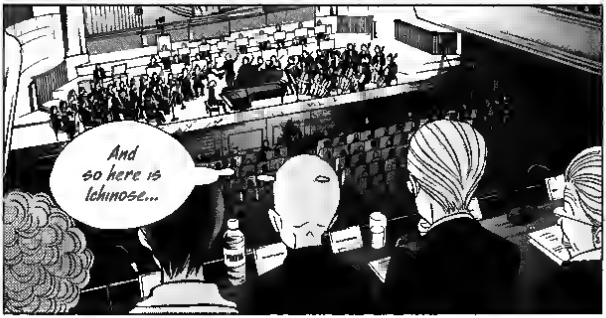
Artwork from "Ayesha's Secret"

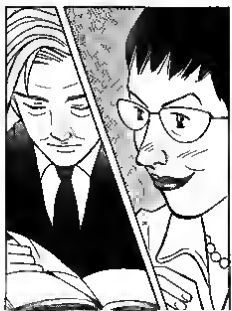
The orchestra...
Has started playing.
At last...
At last...
At long last, it's Kai's...
Final performance!!

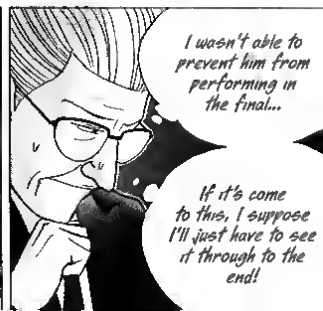
Chapter 215 In the Center of a Shining World

I am so feeling so on edge...
That the four minutes of ochestral intro are making me impatient!

Finally!
I can finally listen to Ichinose's playing!


And so here is Ichinose...




I wasn't able to prevent him from performing in the final...
If it's come to this, I suppose I'll just have to see it through to the end!

For so many years...

I've been waiting for this...

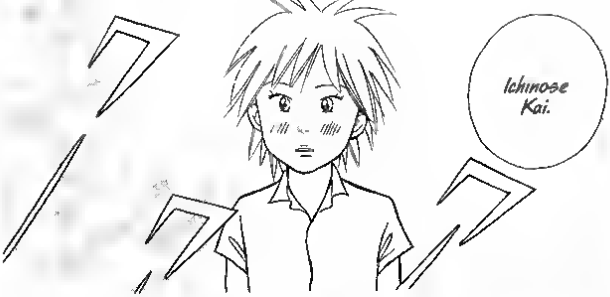
Yes! Ever since that time...

Ahh...

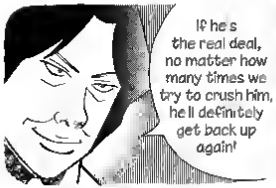
Kai...

It feels like I've always been waiting for this moment.

That boy was called...

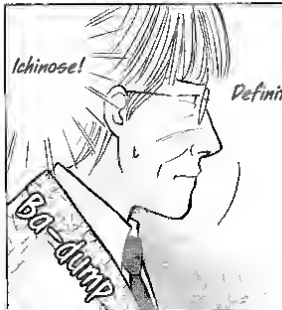

Ichinose Kai.

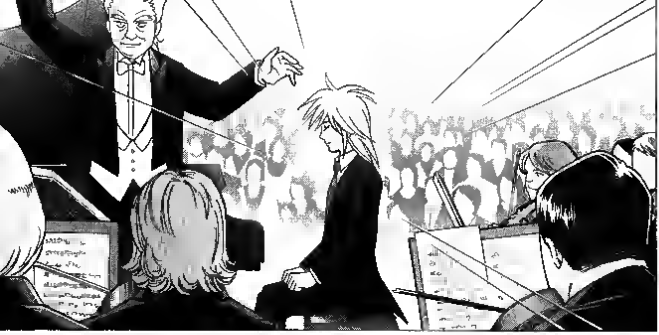
No need to worry, Shiba!

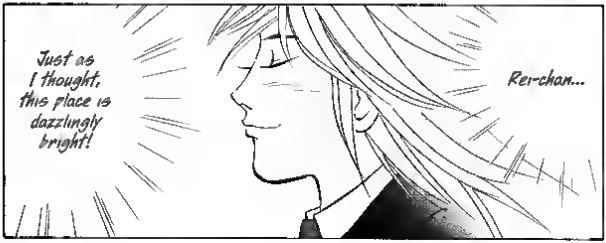

If he's the real deal, no matter how many times we try to crush him, he'll definitely get back up again!

The name of the genius whose talent got buried by us dickhead judges.
People won't forget...

Ichinose!
Ba-dump
Ba-dump


Ichinose!
Definitely...
Ba-dump




Just as I thought, this place is dazzlingly bright!
Rei-chan...

And the Warsaw Phil. that he commands...
When the radiant conductor, Kord...

It's the kind of shining stage you'd only ever see in a dream.

Are combined with the legendary Philharmonic Hall...

Stop it! That's not what I meant!

Kai, you're always sparkly and bright!

Fufu...

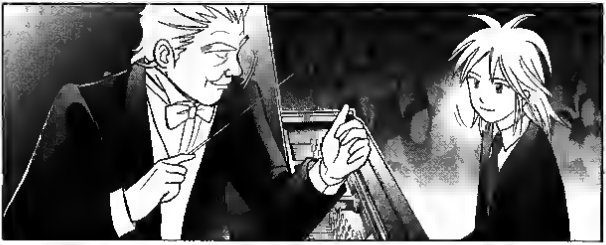
That stage has got to be super sparkly and bright!

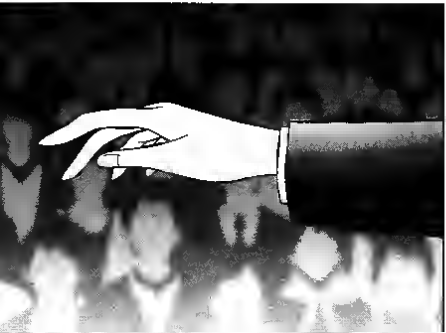
Rei-chan...

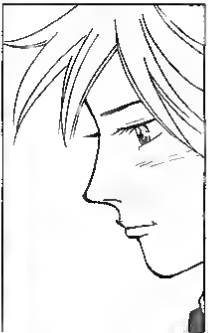
I've come to keep my promise!
Yo! Chopin!
So...

So...
Just stay there...
Until the very end...

And listen to me!

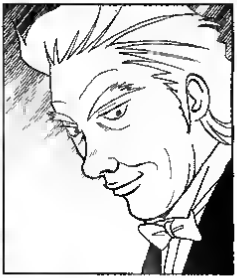






Wow...
Kai's entrance...

Is like an explosion...



It's as if the hall itself were letting out a soundless bellow.

The overwhelming presence of his music...

Amazing!!

And not a single note is off...

Magnificent...

Splendid...

What an incredible introduction!!

OHHH! The explosiveness he displayed in the "Heroic Polonaise" during the second round...

This kid, he's pulling it out right from the start this time!!!

Whoaaaa-aaaa!

This is it! This is it!! Ichinose is definitely going to satisfy me!

What wonderful notes you're playing, Kai...

Haha... He's being quite bold again..

But there's no point in playing the way I did during practice.

Because the stage is alive...

This isn't how he played during practice or rehearsal...

Ah... This is a chemical reaction.

Has completely erased the lingering scent of Wei Pang's performance from the hall.

Kai's introduction...

He has swept the stage clear of every single performance so far...

Not just Wei Pang's performance...

He enters the main theme.
With the concentration of the entire hall focused on the piano...

I think I might have underestimated Kai.

Sou... Sousuke...

Ba-dump

How noble!

Kai...

And yet it still feels so wild! Is it even possible to present such contradicting characteristics at once?!

Will this be my chance to hear the most amazing Chopin's No. 1 ever?

Ba-dump

Ba-dump

Sousuke! I'm on the edge of my seat here!

Reiko-san...

Right now, Kai is playing the piano with the entire world as his audience.

Is Reiko-san watching Kai right now?!
Sae-chan...
Can you hear it...?
I heard you were too scared to watch the first and second round.

I got everyone's help...

I told you to leave it to me, didn't I?

Don't worry, Sensei!

And now Rei-chan is... listening to Kai play the piano!

I remember...

That day...

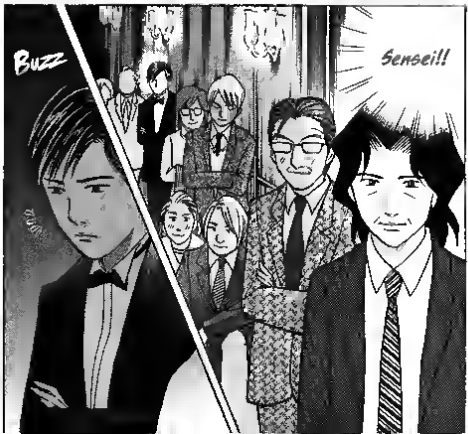
I...

I would like to take him out there.
Japan is too small a place for his piano.
Would you let me show Ichinose... show Kai to the rest of the world?
Ichinose-san...
I will make a place for him in the world.
Sensei!
Sensei!

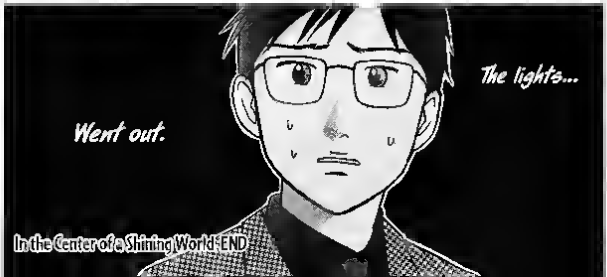
Sensei, thank you!!
Right now, Kai...

Is in the center...

Of the brightest place on earth!!



Buzz
Eh?
...It happened.
And then, just as he was developing the First Movement...
Poof
#7


The lights...
Went out.
In the Center of a Shining World-END

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